

The Little Partner

By

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SHE opened her eyes—then closed them again, an impatient movement of the shoulders seeming to protest against this betrayal into an undesired wakefulness. After that she lay resentfully still, her brows contracted, while the November sunshine, disguised as a kind of luminous fog, crept through the uncurtained window and filled the room with a yellow ghost of daylight.

From the other side of the door came the sound of heavy feet clattering down the wooden stairs, a man's gruff voice, and a shrill-answering soprano—evidently raised in hot debate. The girl lying on the iron bedstead stirred as if aroused effectually by something all too familiar. There was even a startled, hunted look in her brown eyes, now wide open, which died out instantly, leaving behind a lazy smile of utter content. She sat up and, running her fingers through her mop of curly hair, shook her small head from side to side in stern self-admonition.

"Ah!" she breathed luxuriously. Then she pushed the patched quilt to one side and crept out into the dank chill of the morning.

She dressed quickly. There was, indeed, nothing in the room to encourage a lingering toilet. A chipped pudding basin, out of commission, and a beer jug full of smutty water were the only attainable aids to cleanliness. Nevertheless, she washed carefully, making up for the general lack of things by an

additional energy, and singing to herself broken and unrecognizable snatches of melody.

In her search for a rag with which to dry her face, she suddenly stopped short, her voice breaking off into a jagged silence. A man's glove, hidden in the recesses of a moth-eaten muff, had dropped to the ground. She stood for a moment looking down at it, with the color dying out of her cheeks. It was, indeed, a note of discord in the harmony of gray squalor about her. Fur-lined, neatly buttoned, it lay on the dusty floor like a trophy from some other world; and as if moved by the unfitness of its position, she picked it up and dusted it, a twisted little smile breaking through the momentary pallor.

"That's over!" she said, under her breath, and put the glove into a drawer of the rickety table.

Five minutes later she was on her way downstairs, a worn-out fur cap drawn down over her curls, her hands incased in gloves that had once been black, and were now white with age. But she made a neat, even an arresting, figure, in spite of the thinly veneered marks of destitution and the lines of hunger about the rather large, but well-formed, mouth.

At the bottom of the stairs a gaunt, big-boned woman watched her descent with poverty's frowning suspicion of all things poor. Her arms, bare to the elbow, were hidden under her dirty blue apron, her whole attitude was sullenly belligerent.

"Close on ten," she replied curtly to the girl's greeting. "Most of my lodgers are out by eight."

"I'm sorry. I was tired. I was late last night."

"Twelve o'clock it was. I don't 'old with late hours either way. Them that burns their candles at both ends can burn 'em elsewhere."

"It shan't happen again."

She made a movement as if to pass on. The grim figure remained doggedly barring the narrow, ill-lit passage.

"Wait a bit, please. I've something more to say. Lor' knows I ain't one to judge me neighbor, but I'm a decent woman, and I don't 'old with no carryings on. Maybe a girl walks out with 'er young man—I ain't got nothing against that, it's only right and nat'ral—but when she comes 'ome late at night with a torf what wears a diamond in his scarf—why, I strikes, that's all."

The girl laughed, slightly, contemptuously.

"The 'toff,' as you call him, is my husband," she said. "If you had asked me last night, I could have shown you the ring. I can't now, because it's in the pawnshop. But in any case, he won't come again. It's over and done with."

"Split?"

"In all directions." She laughed again, with the ugly note in her voice. "But he's my husband all right, so you can't turn me out—at least not till I've had my money's worth. Are you satisfied?"

"I takes your word for it," the woman assented sullenly, and, turning heavily on her heel, she disappeared into the dark, evil-smelling kitchen.

The girl went on her way out of the narrow back street into the tense bustle of the great thoroughfares. After the first few minutes the sneer that had disfigured her face passed away and gave place to a joyousness only half suppressed. Though no smile flickered about her lips, the very poise of her young head expressed laughter—that laughter that comes from the pure exhilaration of life; and the clip-clap of

her worn, high-heeled little shoes rang like a challenge.

Many—even of the busiest—turned to look after her with the unconscious tenderness of care for a light heart—but she looked at no one. Her eyes were fixed alertly, eagerly, on the shop windows, and presently, after an hour's brisk walk, she stopped. A white slip of paper, glued unobtrusively in the corner pane of a milliner's establishment, announced that a trimming hand was wanted—"experience required."

After a moment's hesitation she pushed open the glass door, with its gold-lettered "Madame la Bayonne," and entered. There was a shadow of defiance in her attitude, as the majestic being in black satin sailed down upon her, and something of the same truculency rang in her voice as she answered the Personage's doubtful question.

"I saw in the window that you wanted a hand," she said, the rich color dyeing her cheeks. "I thought, perhaps, I'd do."

"I don't know. You have had experience?"

"Yes, a little—with my own things—— Not lately, of course, but before—at other times. And I have taste—I like it."

She was stammering eagerly, like a child, trying to combat the chill suspicion in the other woman's eyes. Madame la Bayonne lifted her painfully symmetrical brows.

"We have had any number of applicants. They have all had experience of that sort, and taste is a disadvantage nowadays. What references have you?"

"I—— I don't know—I don't think I have any. My people lived in the country—and they're dead now."

"Oh! Are you living alone, then?"

"Yes—now. I'm married."

There was a little silence. Madame la Bayonne's ivory face had become expressionless.

"I am afraid you vill not do," she said, remembering her French accent. "It is always ze same trouble—either

ze applicants are too pretty or too plain. You are too pretty. My customers do not like that. Besides, we never take married assistants—at least—as the applicant turned away—"only with a premium. Twenty pounds ze first year, and afterward—"

"I have just sixpence," the girl interrupted, with a jerky laugh. "I'm afraid you're right—I won't do."

After that she answered three other similar notices with similar results. Each time the announcement of her married state turned the wavering scales against her, and the fourth time she suppressed the information. For a moment it had seemed as if success were in sight, and then a direct question truthfully answered sent her out on to the street again.

And now the laughter had gone out of her. She trailed along with the rest, footsore and, finally, faint. The faintness came over her suddenly like a black cloud, and, when it passed, she found herself before a quiet little restaurant, whose precious odors, wafted out on the fog, reminded her that she had not breakfasted. Recklessly she drew out her purse. It contained sixpence. The coin was all that stood between her and final destitution, but youth is opportunist, and present need the greatest. With her sixpence clasped tight in the palm of her poor suede glove, she entered.

The place was still nearly empty. Black-robed figures hovered expectantly around the white tables, and at the far end a single guest sat intent over his morning's paper. Timidly she took the table nearest him. The gilded splendor of the place awed and frightened her, and the stranger's proximity seemed to lessen her loneliness. She felt that he looked up at her, and then the waiter was at her elbow, mumbling long lists of unintelligible suggestions.

Conquering the desire to choose at random, she asked for the bill of fare, and from the list of tempting mysteries she chose a poached egg—the only edible that came within the radius of her sixpence. The waiter, grown suddenly indifferent, flicked the table with

his napkin and passed on, leaving her to her isolation.

She looked about her, and because her neighbor seemed unconsciously to companion her, she looked at him longest. She wondered who and what he was. In business probably—a big business. There was an air of quiet opulency about him that her own penury exaggerated. His clothes sat well, in spite of a slight clerical droop of the shoulders, and there was a touch of agreeable masculine vanity about the fair, carefully trimmed mustache. Also, his table was richly spread—a detail that counted largely in her eyes at that moment.

"Poached egg, miss!"

The waiter spoke loudly, as if repeating an affront delivered at his person, and the stranger looked up. She crimsoned under the sudden half-amused interest in the pleasant eyes, and then speedily forgot his existence.

She would like to have eaten slowly, because as long as she had anything to eat, the place, with its warmth and superficial grandeur, was partly hers. But a poached egg on toast is short-lived, especially before the attacks of youth and hunger allied, and it was in vain that she lingered over the roll and butter that stood temptingly at her elbow.

Presently the end had been irrevocably reached. Other guests began to arrive, among them an irate old gentleman who glared at her with unconcealed indignation. In a stage undertone he appealed to the waiter, who shrugged his shoulders. She understood that she had offended against the traditions of the place, and the sense of her loneliness and helplessness became crushing. It was clear that a woman with sixpence had no right here.

"Waiter!" she called faintly.

He came at once, while the old gentleman fumed and fretted impatiently at a distance. A slip of paper with indecipherable hieroglyphics was slammed down beside her empty plate.

"How much did you say?"

"Eightpence, miss."

She stared up at him, white to the lips.

"I thought—a poached egg——"

"Sixpence the egg, twopence roll and butter."

She fumbled blindly, mechanically, for the little purse. When she opened it, in spite of passionate supplication, no miracle had been performed. The sixpence lay in pathetic solitude among the folds.

"I—I'm awfully sorry—I thought I had a sovereign with me—I don't know—I must have lost it——"

She lied badly. Disbelief was written all over the waiter's acid countenance.

"Eightpence, please, miss."

"I tell you—I haven't got it. I'll bring it another time——"

"Won't do. We don't run accounts here. I'll have to speak to the manager——"

At that moment the stranger rose.

"What's the matter?" he asked quietly.

She looked up at him with the reckless confidence of despair, and the waiter's threatening attitude collapsed to the customary servility.

"Lady can't pay, sir. Says she's lost her money."

"A sovereign——" she broke in eagerly. "I can't think what I can have done with it."

"What's the damage?"

"Twopence to pay, sir."

The stranger put down sixpence. She made a little gesture of protest, and he laughed kindly.

"Don't argue. It's nothing. I'm pleased to have been able to help you out. The same thing happened to me once, and the fool man nearly ran me in." The waiter here beat a hasty retreat. "That sort of thing happens to every one at some time or other. You can send me the money in stamps if you want to." He took down his silk hat from the peg and smiled at her. "I hope you'll find that sovereign in one of those mysterious feminine pockets. Good-by!"

He bowed courteously and passed on. Obeying a sudden impulse, she sprang up and followed him out to the foggy street.

"Please——" she gasped. "I can't send you those stamps unless you give me your address."

He swung round, for the first time with a touch of suspicion, but the desperate honesty in her eyes was disarming.

"True. Number five Halley Street. But don't bother——"

"Yes—yes, I'd rather. And there's something else. You were so kind, and I felt how mean it was of me. I lied."

"You——"

"Yes—about that sovereign. I haven't ever had a sovereign—not for weeks—only sixpence."

"Only sixpence!" he echoed, aghast.

"Yes. You see, the waiter frightened me. I thought a poached egg——"

"Look here," he interrupted peremptorily, "hadn't you got more than sixpence in the world?"

"No."

"Where are your people?"

"I haven't got any people. I'm——"

She stopped, and though he did not see it, her eyes hardened. "I'm all alone."

He turned and looked irresolutely about him.

"Walk with me to the end of the street," he said quietly. "You had better tell me about things. We'll waive etiquette, if you don't mind. I have always found that etiquette is suitable only for people with bank accounts."

She followed him with a child's docility, clip-clapping at his side, and answering his businesslike questions with jerky monosyllables. But by the time they had reached the end of the street, he knew a good deal about her, and about Madame la Bayonne and other unsympathetic characters.

"Now, see here," he said, and stopped and looked down at her, "this has got to be helped. I can't do much, for the simple, but unsatisfactory, reason that you are a woman and I am a man, and etiquette grabs us in spite of ourselves. If you were a man, I'd run you home and give you a shake-down and square meals till you got a job. As it is, I've got to get you the job at once. Here's my card and business address. You see, I'm head cashier to the firm. It's

a big firm in a quiet way—Cohen & Leslie—but there are always odd jobs for people who aren't stiff-necked. You aren't stiff-necked, are you?"

"Oh, no, no!"

"Well, then, I think I can get you something. The sorter has just lost her job, and you might take it. It's a brainless business, but it means fifteen shillings a week, and later on you'll be moved up. Come this afternoon, will you? And I'll see you through."

"Thank you—Mr. Leslie."

He laughed.

"No—I'm not the partner—plain John Ingles, cashier. What's your name?"

"Jessie Arnold."

"Well, then, good-by and good luck, Miss Arnold."

Her lips parted—but he lifted his hat again, and was lost in the thickening fog, leaving her with the slip of pasteboard held fast in her small hand, and her eyes full of a wondering, almost incredulous, happiness.

Presently she turned and went homeward. Her step was firm and confident again, but the daring joyousness of the morning had sobered to a grave determination. People did not look at her now. She was just one of themselves—one of the workers—with the same cares and responsibilities, and the same goal—existence at whatever cost.

At the door of her gloomy lodging a man met her. He loomed out of the fog so suddenly that, taken by surprise, she cried out. Then she stood rigid, staring at him.

"Hello, Jessie!" he said. He was as out of place in the dirty street as the fur-lined glove had been in the garret. Everything about him was immaculate. His clothes were obvious Bond Street creations, and were in such perfect taste that they were vulgar. They sat his small, elegant figure with fashionable looseness, and, like his dark, somewhat animal, face, they displeased even while they attracted.

"Hello, Jessie!" he repeated, stretching out a confident hand.

She shrank from him.

"Now, don't bear malice—there's a good girl. We must have been both a bit squiffy last night. At any rate, I know I can't do without you, and I fancy you can't do without me. So let's start all over again."

Her face was dangerously white as she struck his hand aside.

"That's where you're wrong. I've learned something since last night. When I woke up this morning, I breathed a sigh of relief because I was free—free from you, do you understand? No, don't laugh. I know there was a time when I couldn't resist you, but that's over. You've broken the last link, and it's over. You'd better be clear on that point. I've got a job, and I'm going to lead a decent, self-respecting life. If you dare try to interfere with me, I'll do for you and for myself. This is my last chance, and I'm desperate. If you are wise, you'll keep clear of me."

He quailed before her vehemence, and she swept him aside like a straw out of her path. He smiled cynically after her, but the hand at the corner of his little, dark mustache trembled.

II.

It came about that John Ingles walked home with her. The first time it was to show her the way out of the intricate mesh of alleys and side streets that led to Cohen & Leslie's offices; the second time he took her to her new lodgings—and after that it became a habit. It became a habit, also, to talk to her about his affairs and the affairs of the business in which he had a passionate interest. She had a quiet, sympathetic way of listening, and her grasp of figures and the niceties of contracts surprised and charmed him. At the end of her first month he called her his "little partner," and laughed boyishly over it.

"It slipped out," he explained. "That's what I always call you to myself. You know more about the business than my private clerk. Who knows what may happen?"

They were passing under a street

lamp at the time, and, glancing down, he saw that her cheeks were wet. He stopped in consternation.

"Why, you're crying! Have I said anything to hurt you?"

"No, no!" She brushed her hand impatiently over her eyes. "I am only so happy."

"Do people cry when they are happy?"

"Women do."

"And when they are unhappy?" quizzically.

"They laugh—sometimes."

Her tones sobered him—he did not know why. It was the first time that they had talked about something outside business together, and he was startled by the realization that her personality was unknown, and yet strangely familiar to him. It was like a language that he had often heard, and had grown to find beautiful, but without understanding its meaning.

"Are you really happy?" he asked, with a new clumsiness.

"Very."

"The post of sorter isn't exactly lucrative. Why are you happy?"

She clasped her hands with a sudden, swift outbreak of feeling.

"It's clean, honest work. The money I earn is clean and honest. And then, you are my friend. You have been so good, so wonderfully kind to me."

"I? If I have been kind to you, other people must have been cruel."

"Yes—cruel. Physically, and then—in a worse way."

"I don't understand."

"In a way that makes you loathe yourself and every one, that makes you do things that sicken you with disgust—that makes you muddle up right and wrong, and——"

She stopped with a quick-drawn breath. They had reached the door of her new lodging, and he took her hand and held it between his own.

"Does it help—that I am your friend?"

She nodded.

"I trust you. You are so honest, and clean, and good."

"How you must have suffered to say that so often! But the storms are over now."

"I wonder," she said, with a sudden listlessness.

"At least I will protect you from them."

"You don't know that—that I am worthy. I—I may be cheating you."

"I know you are not—I trust you—little partner."

She looked up, and the absolute goodness of his face seemed to stun her. She drew her hand away from him.

"Good night. I—will you walk home with me to-morrow?"

"Of course. I always do."

"Yes—yes—but to-morrow night particularly. I have something I must tell you."

"Why not now?"

"It's late, and I'm tired." Her voice quivered. "Good night."

"Good night, dear."

She carried the last word with her up into her sober little room. She listened to its echo as she sat by the rough deal table, with her head between her hands, her teeth gritted together in the effort to choke back the tearing sobs. Presently she took up a pen and a sheet of cheap note paper, and began to write. She had covered the first page with small, fiercely written words when some one tapped at the door, and in answer to her startled exclamation, her landlady pushed a disordered head through the aperture.

"A letter for you, miss. An old woman brought it. She said as 'ow she had given your address to no one, but that you might want the letter. The man who 'ad left it at 'er 'ouse said it was urgent."

Wordless, she took the extended envelope, and long after the landlady's heavy footsteps had died along the passage, she stood staring down at the inscription with blank, fascinated eyes. Then, at last, she tore the cover open. The letter was brief, badly written in a hand that she only vaguely recognized:

DEAR JESSIE: This is to say that Arnold was knocked down yesterday and badly hurt. He's done for and wants to see you. You'd

better hurry. Doctor says he won't last till to-night. Yours,
BILLY.

That was all. Instinctively she glanced at the postmark. It bore yesterday's date. A low, choking sound that was half a laugh, half a sob, broke from her lips. She went back to the table, where she had been writing, and tore her unfinished letter into a thousand pieces.

"To-morrow I will make sure," she said aloud.

The next day she stood, as usual, at her table in Cohen & Leslie's office, and sorted out the morning post. She sang as she worked, and the accountant reproved her sharply.

"I'm so happy," she said, tossing back the curls, and smiling radiantly into his sour face. "Mayn't we be happy when sorting out dull letters?"

"Oh, if you can manage it—by all means," he retorted dryly. "But please try to express your emotion in a less audible fashion."

After that she was quiet, but the suppressed laughter danced in her eyes, brightening to something deeper, more intense, as Ingles entered. Then her head drooped a little, and the hands that held the bundle of letters shook. He came over to her side and bent over her as if discussing some point of business with her.

"I have been worrying about what you are going to tell me to-night," he said, in a low voice. "You seemed so sad—the thought of your face keeps me from my work. It is nothing serious?"

"No," she said faintly, "not now."

He breathed a smothered sigh of relief.

"I, too, have something to tell you—to-night." Then, with a sudden change of voice: "Thank you, Miss Arnold. That is all I wanted to know. Good morning."

He passed on to the safe room, and she heard the click of the machinery as he arranged the secret combination, then the swing of the iron door. She looked up then, staring in front of her with parted lips as if she saw something immense and wonderful in the rows of dusty archives in front of her.

"This afternoon I will go and make sure."

"What did you say, Miss Arnold?"

"Nothing." She bit her lip. "I was only reminding myself of something I had to do."

The accountant growled.

"I should be obliged if you would manage your affairs less noisily," he requested.

That afternoon she did not go out. There was too much to do, and a heavy fog inclosed the city in a gloomy ochre-tinted prison. It would have been impossible for her to have found her way. So it happened that she did not make sure, after all.

Toward evening the fog lifted. Jessie Arnold stood at the entrance to the narrow alley that led to Cohen & Leslie's offices, and gazed up at the network of silver drawn across the dome of impenetrable violet. Even when a man's footsteps rang out in the stillness she did not turn; only her small hands clenched spasmodically, and her whole body grew taut and still. He came and stood by her side, and for a full minute they did not speak or look at each other.

"How beautiful London can be!" he said softly.

She nodded. "Yes." And there was again silence. Suddenly she felt his hand on her arm.

"Won't you tell me now—what was troubling you?"

She started as if from a dream.

"Now? Isn't it a shame to spoil anything so—so perfect?"

"Yes, dear—I only thought——"

"It was—nothing. I had a headache and saw things too darkly. It's all right now."

"Sure?"

"Yes."

They did not move on into the busy thoroughfare as was their wont. The roar of the traffic sounded muffled and far off, and around them was a tranquil, sleepy quiet. The light from the office window, which had thrown a gold patch on the stone pavement, died out suddenly.

"Old Heatherly has been his round,"

Ingles said. "We shall be had up as suspicious characters. But you haven't asked me for my good news."

"I—did not know that it was good news."

"Cohen was pleased about that letter you found. He made inquiries as to what you could do, and will offer you a post as secretary as soon as you have got on with your shorthand. It means two pounds a week."

She turned swiftly.

"That's your doing. How can I thank you? Why are you so good to me?"

"Because you are dearer to me than anything on earth." There was a little silence. The hand on her arm dropped as if setting her free. "It doesn't make any difference—whether you care or not—little partner. I shall always love you—and try to smooth things for you. You must understand before you answer—"

"I love you!" she cried out suddenly, vehemently. "God have mercy—I love you—more than my salvation!"

"Jessie——" He caught her to him, and his voice rang with hoarse, incredulous happiness. "Jessie—my wife!"

She lifted her head an instant—listening, then lay still in weary, absolute surrender.

III.

Mrs. James, landlady of No. 5 Halley Street, leaned over the banisters. There was a light burning downstairs in the hall, and she thought that she saw a shadow move, but she was short-sighted, and could not be sure.

"Is that you, Mrs. Ingles?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's all right. Is the master with you?"

There was an instant's silence.

"Yes—no, I mean. He's coming later."

"Well, the supper's ready, but it's cold, and it don't make no odds. I thought I heard a man's voice."

"It must have been outside in the street. I—I am quite alone."

"All right, ma'am. Aren't you feeling well?"

"Yes—quite. Why?"

"Your voice sounded queer—that's all, ma'am."

Mrs. James went back into her own room and closed the door. Downstairs there was again absolute silence. Mrs. John Ingles stood with her shoulders against the wall, her head thrown back, her eyes glazed and staring. Opposite her, outside the circle of light, a man watched her.

"You?" she said, almost inaudibly.

"Yes—me. It's a surprise, isn't it?"

"I thought—you were dead."

"You wished it, eh?"

"Yes."

He laughed soundlessly.

"Well, you're frank, anyhow. There was a time when you wouldn't have said that, but no matter. 'Frailty' and so forth. You look flourishing, though."

"For God's sake—you mustn't stay here! My husband may be here any minute."

He laughed again, but followed her out into the windy street.

"Your husband—that's good! Modern matrimony, eh? You seem pretty sure of yourself."

"I tell you—I thought you were dead. I wrote to Bill and explained, and he said—you had died——"

"Billy's a good pal."

They were passing under the wavering light of a street lamp, and she stopped and stared at him, sick loathing on her ashy face.

"You told him——"

"I suggested it as a little joke. I owed you one. And then there was another reason. Damn you—don't look like that!" He lifted a clenched, furious fist, and then, as she neither flinched nor moved, he went on sullenly: "It wasn't a joke, either. I was really bad—a broken leg, badly set. It kept me laid up for months, and by that time I was stony. You can see that."

He jerked his shoulders, and she looked at him with a kind of stunned curiosity. The old glamour that had once fascinated her was gone. He was just a poor, ragged remnant of what

had been—with the lines of hunger and despair carved on his dark, reckless face. His vanity winced under the expression in her eyes.

"I'm not pretty to look at, am I? Not so handsome as that day when you——"

"Be silent!" She walked on, throwing one hunted, terrified glance over her shoulder. "Why have you followed me?"

"Followed you? That's good. Do you think I didn't know where you lived? Do you think I don't know all about that quiet little wedding with the handsome cashier of Cohen & Leslie? Why, I looked upon myself as the matchmaker in the business——"

"Harry, for God's sake be careful! I told you——"

"That you were desperate? Well, that's what I want you to be."

"Are you sure? I might kill you."

"No, you wouldn't—not now." He lurched closer to her. "Things aren't quite what they were, you see. Cohen & Leslie are a respectable firm. They wouldn't care for a cashier whose wife was a murderess, even if she had the pluck to cut her own throat afterward. You see that, don't you?"

She stood still and looked at him, her lips parted as if she were breathing hard.

"There is one way—I might tell my husband the truth."

"And ruin him. A man with a smear like that on his name is done for."

"That's what you want, isn't it?"

"No." He thrust his hands deep into his pockets and grinned sardonically. "No, I am not out on pure revenge, Jess. I want money."

"I have none."

"I didn't say from you. I'm a good-natured fellow. I don't squeeze stones. Look here, Jess, things are getting too sultry for me in this country. I must be out of it at the end of the week, and I must have money—any amount. To-day is Monday—I sail Friday. That leaves you four nights and three days. Now, listen carefully. You'll find out the secret combinations of Cohen's safe-room lock, and you'll find out when the

lookout goes his rounds. It will be easy enough—your husband knows. To-morrow night you will meet me out here, and if I pull the affair off, you won't see me again. That's my bargain."

"No, Harry——" She broke down suddenly, utterly, her hands clasped in childish pleading, the tears raining down her white cheeks. "Harry, think—think just a moment! You aren't all bad—I know you're not. Think what you have done to me! When I married you I believed in you—I loved you. And you used my love to drag me down—down into the mud. You didn't care. But there was something in me that never quite yielded—something in the end that set me free."

"I began again. I buried the past. I refused to remember that you had ever been. It was a hard fight—Harry, you don't know how hard! But I found work—and afterward love, the genuine, honest, selfless thing that I had dreamed of. It was the most awful temptation of my life, but I would not have yielded—I loved him too much. Then the last barrier—you—seemed to have been swept out of my path, and I believed that I had a right to my happiness, a right to bury my past with you—for his sake as well as for my own."

"But, instead, you made me do the cruelest, meanest thing in my life. You made me betray him, and now you are trying to force me to ruin him. But you won't do it—you can't, Harry. You are not bad enough for that. You are going to atone to me for the past, as I will atone to him with my whole life—my silence——"

"Don't whine!" He freed himself roughly from her imploring hands. "I hate women who whine. I have said what I have to say. It's up to you to get out of the mess. If I wanted to hurt you, I could have you in the lockup in an hour, and your husband out of his job in three days. Instead, I am giving you a fighting chance. Think it over. I shall be here at the same time to-morrow. No tricks—it is I who am desperate this time."

He turned heavily on his heel and

limped away into the stormy darkness. Mrs. Ingles walked back the way she had come. Her step was like that of a sleepwalker, steady, mechanical, unerring. At the door of No. 5 Halley Street, Mrs. James met her.

"Oh, ma'am—I thought you was at home. I've been that frightened! The master came back half an hour ago in a high fever. I've sent for the doctor—— Why, dear Heaven—what is it? You're not going to——"

Mrs. John Ingles had collapsed senseless at her feet.

IV.

It was very quiet in Ingles' sick room. The lamp standing on the table at the side of the bed had been carefully shaded so that no light fell on the white face on the pillow; and the woman who called herself Mrs. John Ingles stood in the shadow, motionless as some graven image of despair.

All night and all day she had kept her place, scarcely speaking save to give the necessary orders, apparently indefatigable. But in the twelve hours following that sudden fainting fit, she had changed. Something more than a fully matured womanhood had come over her. Her lips were tight set, and there was that in her eyes which mere age and care cannot give. They were hard and stony, and seemed to mock the soft, unmanageable curls that still framed the white, haggard features. Presently Ingles stirred, and a weak hand felt hesitatingly over the coverlid. She took it and held it.

"Jessie?"

"My darling!"

She dropped on her knees beside him, her free hand soothing the hot forehead, her voice deep with love and a compassion almost divine in its immensity. It seemed to reach Ingles' beclouded consciousness, for he opened his eyes and looked at her.

"You—you are here? I was afraid—— Nothing has happened?"

"No—no. The doctor says you will soon be well if you are quiet and patient. Mr. Cohen has been around, and wants you not to worry——"

"Ah!" A hoarse exclamation broke from his parched lips. "That was my dream—Cohen came and said that I had been disloyal to my trust—that the bank was ruined—through me. Jessie, my papers—where are they?"

He had dragged himself up, his eyes blazing with fever, and she rose, terrified, to her feet.

"My papers!" he repeated wildly.

"John—lie down—they are safe here!"

She ran to a side table and brought them to him, and he clutched them as a man might clutch at his salvation.

"Ah—yes—I must keep them here—under my pillow. No one has seen them?"

"Only I. John, for love of me——"

"That's good." In his dawning delirium, his mind still followed the trail of his anxiety with terrible persistence. "There was the safe-room combination among them——"

"I know. Be quiet, John."

"You know?"

"I—I looked through them to see if they were important——"

"Yes? But no one else. Only Cohen and I know that combination. It was a new one—if anything happened I should be responsible—the bank ruined and——"

"John!" She bent over him, and her voice was rough and edged with despair. "Do you care for that bank more than for me—more than for anything else on earth?"

"You don't understand—women never do—— A man's integrity—fidelity—— In my dream I saw it all clearly—— It haunts me—little partner—when——"

Her hold on his hand relaxed.

"If I—I went and saw that everything was all right—would you sleep?"

"Yes—yes——"

His voice trailed off. He lay quiet with exhaustion—she bent over him and kissed him.

"Good night, beloved."

She turned and left the room, with hat and coat over her arm. Outside, she met Mrs. James, heavy-eyed and tearful.

"The master—'ow is he, ma'am?"

"Sleeping. I want you to stay with him—till I come back. He has had a dream that something is wrong at the bank, and I am going to run around to ease his mind. I have his private key. It's a fancy, of course, but he must be humored. Remember his medicine at twelve!"

The landlady looked at her in admiring wonder.

"My! You are a wife, and no mistake! If all wives were like you, there'd be a deal less trouble in the world."

"Never mind that. Mrs. James—I, too, have a presentiment—— If anything happens to me—you'll see him through?"

"Why, ma'am, how you take on! My poor lamb—you're just worn out! There, there, I promise. Gawd bless your heart!"

They kissed each other, united from that hour by the sympathy that bridges every gulf of class or temperament, and Jessie Ingles went out alone into the night.

Everything was quiet and peaceful as she reached the entrance to Cohen & Leslie's premises. The watchman, who had just been his rounds, passed her unnoticed as she crouched among the shadows. He was whistling cheerily to himself, leaving behind him a suggestive odor of raw brandy.

Jessie Ingles waited until his heavy footsteps had died into silence, then she crept up to a little side door which led to her husband's office. As the clock of some neighboring church struck the hour, she inserted the key and turned it softly in the lock. Then she stood still and listened to the chimes. Ten o'clock—again silence. She entered and closed the door behind her.

The electric switch was at hand, but she did not touch it, for she knew that at night it was connected with an alarm. Instead, she felt cautiously along the wall for the matches, and struck a light. The tiny glimmer cast weird, fantastic shadows over the walls, and with a suppressed shudder she lit the green-

shaded office lamp and lifted it high above her head. There was a draft somewhere—as if a window had been left open—and the cold air brushed dankly against her cheeks, sending a chill of fear to her very soul.

She went on, up the narrow stairs whose stealthy creaking alone broke the haunted silence. It was as if the ghosts of all those who had worked, and striven, and suffered in these old offices watched her. At the end of the first landing, a steel-lined door blocked her progress. At night it was locked and bolted. To-night it yielded smoothly, silently, to her touch.

"Harry?" she said, scarcely above her breath.

There was the click of a shutter being snapped to, a scuffling; then a tense, waiting silence.

"Harry?" she repeated.

She entered. The light from the lamp made a halo of light around her and threw into darkness the figure crouching at the far end of the room. The door of the safe room stood open, gaping like the entrance to some secret dungeon.

"Harry—it's—I. Don't shoot——"

He came toward her, lowering the muzzle of his revolver. His face was blackened with grime, his eyes blood-shot, alive with straining fear.

"You! What the devil are you doing here? If it's one of your damned tricks, I'll——"

"The watch won't be around for another hour," she interrupted contemptuously. "I am alone."

"Then——"

She put the lamp on the table, and stood there gazing at him steadily, almost sightlessly.

"I've come to stop you."

"There is danger?"

"None yet—there may be."

"From whom?"

"From me."

He tried to laugh. The expression on her face choked the laugh in his throat.

"More threats? I thought we'd settled that——"

"Things are different now. I've

thought it over. You ruined me—made me like yourself, bad and unscrupulous; and the worst thing I ever did was to try and blot out the past and drag myself out of the mire. I've ruined the man whom I love, and who loves me. I have brought dishonor on him, but I swear I will not betray him further, and that the dishonor shall only be reflected dishonor—not his own. It may be said that he married a bad woman, but it shall not be said that through his blindness others suffered. I am his partner—he said so—in all things—whether honestly or not—and I am here to defend what is his—and mine. You must not touch that money! You must go—at once!”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“It's too late. That sounds pretty, but I want money. You should have thought all these highfaluting thoughts before——”

He turned away. She sprang across the room to the electric bell, and laid her hand on it.

“It's not too late——”

He was quicker than her intention. With a savage, reckless blow, he struck at her, sending her reeling against the table where the lamp stood. There was a crash—a moment's darkness—then, like some devil let loose, a sheet of flame blazed up and spread with incredible swiftness along the petroleum-soaked carpet—up along the walls, and the heavy baize curtains across the door. Instinctively, Arnold had leaped back out of reach of the hungry, roaring danger.

“You fool—you infernal fool!” he screamed. “Make a dash for it—now——”

She stood quietly at one side, watching him, a curious smile about her lips. He cursed incoherently. “I won't leave you—like that—— Besides—it's too late. The window——” He dashed his fist through the panes, and the broken glass clattered on the stone pavement beneath with a mocking gayety.

There was a groan. “Barred—cut off, by God——” He swung around.

The flames were licking the ceiling. The scorching radiance burned down on their faces with the merciless intensity of a diabolical limelight thrown on the scene of some hideous melodrama.

“The safe room!” Arnold gasped. “It's our only chance——”

He thrust her, unresisting, into the dark, narrow confines of the steel-lined fastness and followed. There was the clang of a heavy door—then a darkness and silence so sudden, so absolute, that it was as if their sight and hearing had been instantaneously blotted out. The roar of the flames was gone—the subtle, intangible movement of living air gave place to something indescribably death-like.

“We're safe,” Arnold's voice said through the darkness. “Unless we're roasted alive. But I don't think so. The place is fireproof, and the alarm will be given soon. We can wait till they come to look after their precious money. We're caught—though—both of us. I'd kill you for this, Jessie, if it wasn't for the pleasure of seeing you when they find us——”

“When they find us,” she repeated tonelessly.

He struck a match. It flickered uncertainly, but it served to light up his haggard face and the solemn, betitled iron boxes lining the walls. He laughed.

“Cozy quarters, eh? Surrounded by wealth—— By Jove, you were a fool not to have thrown in with me! What a haul it would have been!”

She made no answer. She stood quickly against the door, her hands clasped before her, her eyes fixed on the darkness. Some minutes passed. He struck another match. It burned unsteadily, and then died out. He coughed.

“How close and dank the air is! It might be a tomb.”

“Yes,” she echoed monotonously.

“You are scarcely a gay companion. What are you thinking about?”

“That does not concern you,” she returned, with a flash of stern dignity. He relapsed into silence. But after a

minute, as if urged by a rising uneasiness, he spoke again.

"Queer to think what is going on outside—the flames, the firemen, the crowd, and we here snug and safe in the very midst of it all. It would be worth while living through it if it wasn't for what waited us at the end. Would you object if I smoked, or would it make the air too close for you?"

"I don't think it will make much difference."

He struck a third match. It burned badly.

"Queer! There must be a draft somewhere."

"No, the place is air-tight."

He did not move or speak. It was as if he had been caught by the throat, so that even his breathing had been arrested. When he spoke again, his voice was that of a man in the grip of panic.

"You mean——"

"My husband told me that a man could live only an hour in this place," she explained simply.

"An hour—but in an hour they will have let us out——"

"There are two of us."

"My——" He tried to laugh, but a fit of coughing interrupted him. In a brutal revulsion of feeling, he sprang at her through the darkness, and gripped her by the shoulders.

"You vixen! You've done for me—I could kill you——"

She pushed him from her with a gentle strength.

"What's the use? We might as well die decently. It's all that's left us."

"I won't die—I can't——"

But he dropped away from her, whimpering like a child, and she stretched out her hand with a movement of pity.

"I'm sorry, Harry. I didn't mean to hurt you like this. I can't help it now, can I?"

He made no answer, and the minutes passed. Her own breathing had become heavy and labored, and with a quiet resignation she dropped to her knees, waiting the end. Presently, through the drumming in her ears, she

heard her companion laugh. The sound rang curiously light-hearted. It was as if, in this final and supreme moment, something of his old, flashy courage had flickered up out of the wreckage of his life.

"You're a plucky woman—Jessie. Couldn't have believed it of you. 'Pon my word, I think if we got out of this, I'd pretend you caught me red-handed. You'd be a heroine then, Jessie—Cohen's pet lamb—eh?"

A fresh fit of coughing interrupted him.

"We shan't get out of this," she said gently.

He was silent a moment, fighting for breath.

"What a beastly waste of life, Jessie! One of us might have lived—and been happy. I'm not spiteful. I didn't want to hurt you—only the money. You understand—I don't hurt when it doesn't benefit me. In fact——" He hesitated, and then went on slowly, distinctly: "Look here, Jessie; one of us may get out of this. If it's you—play the game. Pretend you found me—and fought with me—and all that. Don't tell your husband anything—it would be easier to confess, but it would do for him. You'll have the courage to go on with it alone—for his sake. Promise—it would be a relief to know——"

She cried out between clenched teeth:

"Don't! We can't get out—it's too late——"

"I don't know. I guess there's air enough for one of us for a bit longer. Wait a minute——"

"What's that?" she breathed.

He laughed.

"I dropped a bit of glass—that's all——"

Her head dropped forward. When he spoke again, his voice sounded far off.

"Jessie, give me your hand—will you?"

She groped through the darkness, and their hands touched. His hung cold and clammy in her own.

"Good night, Jessie. I'm sorry——"

"Good night—Harry. I'm sorry, too."

His hand fell away. Darkness and silence seemed to envelop her in an impenetrable cloud. Hours passed—or, perhaps, minutes; then a sound broke the stillness—the familiar sound of machinery—as of a lock.

She dragged herself up on her elbow.

"Harry!" she gasped. "They're coming—it's not too late——"

As the door of the great safe was swung open, she fell forward on her face.

The man lying in the far corner did not move.

The papers were full of it. There were graphic descriptions of the plucky secretary's struggle with the safe breaker—of the fire, and their incarceration in the air-tight compartment.

The thief had been a poor sort. Rather than face his punishment, he had taken poison; which was fortunate, for the doctor had assured the reporters that otherwise the air would have been exhausted too soon to save a plucky woman's life. There was a great fuss made—a two days' wonder, to sharpen jaded appetites for sensation—and then the world's customary oblivion.

Through all this Jessie Ingles went her way, gravely, serenely, with something in her eyes that people did not quite understand. Her husband worshiped her, for herself and, perhaps, because he saw in her an instrument of Providence. And he was proud of her. He liked it when people called her a noble woman, who held her husband's happiness higher than her own.

It was true.

For she had found the courage to atone in silence.

